

The Crimson White

State House passes education budget

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For the past few months, state lawmakers in charge of setting and passing the education budget have warned educators that some 3,000 teachers may need to be let go because of the slowing economy.

However, a recession-year education budget designed to protect a majority of teacher jobs in Alabama took its first step Tuesday by being passed in the state House of Representatives by way of a 104-0 vote.

The \$5.48 billion education budget, which now heads to the state Senate for debate, is a \$169.6 million increase from this year's budget, but it does not give teachers any money to buy classroom supplies such as paper and pencils. There will also be no additional money for new textbooks or new library books.

"This year's budget is a pretty bare-bones kind of thing," said Chris Sanders, policy analyst at Alabama Arise and the 2003-04 editor of The Crimson White. "There aren't a whole lot of gains in the budget. State colleges and universities are getting about the same amount of money. Grades K-12 are getting about the same amount of money."

The proposed budget provides enough money to school districts so that there will not have to be fewer school days, which had been previously discussed as a way to save money.

Betty Peters, a member of the state board of education, said that the proposed budget seems fair, although she thinks fewer instructional days would be cost effective.

"If legislators would have cut back five days from our school year, they could have saved us a lot of agony," Peters said. "Teachers have been cutting back on testing, so there are more free days available anyways. We could have saved money that way."

While the jobs of state-funded teachers would be safe upon passage of the budget, those teachers whose jobs are funded by local school boards could lose their positions. Alabama teachers will also see an increase in the amount they have to pay for health insurance.

Peters said it was reasonable for teachers to pay more for their health insurance, which she thinks should have been higher in the first place.

Despite the fact that teachers may have to continue to pay for classroom supplies out of their back pockets, Peters said that she has really been pleased with the response from educators

statewide.

“Teachers are brainstorming on what we can do this school year, and many are willing to forgo some of their pay,” Peters said.

The budget also includes money to buy new school buses for the 2010-11 school year, as well as popular learning programs that help boost student performance in subjects such as math and science.

Randy McKinney, member of the state board of education, emphasized the importance of continuing support for two specific educational programs. “Our state has implemented outstanding programs in the Alabama Reading Initiative and AMSTI (Alabama Math Science Technology Initiative),” he said. “These programs are successful and should remain a priority for continued implementation.”

Arguing that if the state thrives for excellence in education instead of mediocrity, McKinney also said that Alabama has made a lot of progress in the past few years but still has a tremendous amount of work left to be done.

Sanders said he is more worried, in a way, about next year’s budget, and that people may be overly optimistic about how the economy will turn around.

“I think the unspoken story of the day is that people don’t want to think about the way that budget is built on federal stimulus money,” Sanders said. “That money is running out, and, in all likelihood, not going to come next year.”